

## Then Okay

Posted originally on the [Archive of Our Own](http://archiveofourown.org/works/23938366) at <http://archiveofourown.org/works/23938366>.

Rating:	<a href="#">Teen And Up Audiences</a>
Archive Warning:	<a href="#">No Archive Warnings Apply</a>
Category:	<a href="#">M/M</a>
Fandom:	<a href="#">Video Blogging RPF</a> , <a href="#">Minecraft (Video Game)</a> , <a href="#">Youtubers</a> , <a href="#">Real Person Fiction</a>
Relationship:	<a href="#">Clay   Dream/GeorgeNotFound (Video Blogging RPF)</a> , <a href="#">Clay   Dream &amp; GeorgeNotFound (Video Blogging RPF)</a>
Character:	<a href="#">Darryl Noveschosch</a> , <a href="#">Darryl Noveschosch   BadBoyHalo</a> , <a href="#">Sapnap (Video Blogging RPF)</a> , <a href="#">GeorgeNotFound (Video Blogging RPF)</a>
Additional Tags:	<a href="#">Slow Burn</a> , <a href="#">Alternate Universe - College/University</a> , <a href="#">Alternate Universe</a> , <a href="#">Friends to Lovers</a> , <a href="#">Gaming</a> , <a href="#">dreamnotfound</a> , <a href="#">Gream - Freeform</a> , <a href="#">Mutual Pining</a> , <a href="#">Fluff and Angst</a> , <a href="#">Idiots in Love</a>
Language:	English
Stats:	Published: 2020-05-01 Updated: 2020-08-24 Words: 8,531 Chapters: 6/?

## Then Okay

by [eightatleast](#)

### Summary

Clay applied to college with the sole intention of escaping his family. He doesn't expect to join a gaming club, start failing his classes, and fall in love with his best friend, but then again, you never do.

(title is a song by Julia Nunes)

cross-posted to Wattpad

# Oh, Freedom (well, that's just some people talking)

## Chapter Notes

### Disclaimer:

Shipping real people is delicate and dangerous. I am not writing this story with the intention of forcing a relationship on two good friends. I do not condone harassment of the subjects of this story, or prying into their personal lives.

With this in mind, not everything in this story will be accurate. A lot of it is not. This is a work of fiction, and the artistic liberties I take will serve to separate reality from fiction. Further, this work will take place in an Alternate Universe -- hence, fiction. I hope this will remind you, the reader, that my work is not meant to speculate, investigate, or imply anything about anyone's personal life.

My work, and ideally, all other works of fanart and fanfiction, are meant to entertain.

Try to separate the character from the person. It is fun to imagine. It is not fun to bully.

I love and admire both Dream and George immensely and I would hate for my work (or anyone else's work) to become fodder to attack them with. As much as they say they like or are flattered by fanfiction/fanart, there is a line that should not be crossed.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

They sat on flimsy plastic chairs, the rubber bottoms sinking into the hot August mud, as wasps buzzed by the lemonade dispenser and an old man rattled into a microphone up on the platform. Clay was fiddling with his paper cup, unfolding the rim, only half paying attention to the empty promises the dean was making about his, and every other bored freshman's next four years. A little pessimistic? Maybe. But Clay really only committed so he could move out -- a boring little school in New York, as far away from home as money would allow.

His dad snatched the cup away. "Pay attention," he whispered sternly.

It felt like hours before his mom was finally wiping away her tears as they stood at the entrance of Clay's dorm building, his dad tapping his foot. "I know this will be tough, but we all have to be strong," she said. "Call me every night, okay?"

"Of course, mom."

"I love you."

"Love you, too."

They exchanged their hugs and she went, sniffing, to the car. Clay's dad gave a sniff and a nod, and followed suit. Clay waited at the door, waving until the car turned around the bend, watching until it pulled out onto the road, then swiped his ID card and danced into the hallway. Freedom at last!

His parents had taken so long touring the campus and organizing his room that all the other students were in their beds already. Well, at least it seemed that way since the hallway was eerily

quiet and empty, a drastic difference from the move-in bustle in the morning. Clay pulled out his phone to check the time: 8pm! He was too busy gawking at the screen to notice the figure coming out of their room and collided head first with a giant cardboard box.

The figure didn't seem to notice either, as they lost their grip and the box and its contents tumbled to the floor.

"Shit, I'm so sorry!" Clay said, bending down to help pick up the mess.

"You're fine, I wasn't watching," the figure said with an accent. Clay looked up, surprised at the foreign accent to see a flustered freshman, dark haired and red in the face.

"It was totally my fault," Clay retorted, grabbing a handful of pencils and putting them back in the box. The boy met his eye and smiled.

"No, I'm pretty sure I was the one with a box in front of my face," he threw back.

"Yeah, well I was the one dancing through the hallway," Clay added with a smirk.

The boy chuckled. "You were dancing through the hallway?"

"No, but I might as well have been."

They looked down at the box all filled up again, then back at each other.

Clay extended a hand. "I'm Clay."

The boy shook it awkwardly. "George."

"So I'm guessing you're not from around here, huh?" Clay said.

"Nope. What gave it away?" George joked.

"Definitely the huge box full of random crap."

George scoffed. "Right, of course."

Clay leaned against the wall. "What were you even doing with that, anyway?"

George leaned back against the opposite wall. "Just recycling the massive amounts of trash I've accumulated from unpacking."

Clay casually glanced into the box again. "You're still unpacking?"

"Well, yeah," George responded. "I only arrived about an hour ago."

Clay peered past the propped door into George's room. While the right side of the room was fully furnished, the left was still bare save for a made bed. Bins and boxes and bags were scattered around on the floor, but not another person was there.

"By yourself?" Clay asked.

"Well, plane tickets to America aren't exactly cheap, so yeah. It's just me."

Clay frowned a little at that. As much as his parents were pestering him today, he couldn't imagine moving in alone, much less moving to a new country.

“Do you want some help?”

George vigorously shook his head. “No, no, I couldn’t --”

“I mean I’m really not busy --”

“No, it’s alright, you don’t --”

“I’m just saying, it seems like you’ve got a lot of --”

“No, really, I’m fine --”

“Alright!” Clay chuckled. “Alright, if you’re gonna be stubborn, I’ll just let you suffer, then.”

George chuckled and rubbed his neck.

Clay continued, grabbing the cardboard box, “But at least let me take this to the trash for you.”

“Please, don’t --”

“Come on! I was the one that spilled it all over the floor anyway!” He lifted the box into his arms and started walking backwards.

“Oh my god,” George said, rolling his eyes but smiling. He started to trail towards Clay.

Clay picked up the pace. “I’m gonna recycle it! I’m gonna save the Earth and there’s nothing you can do about it.”

George muttered through a smirk, “You’re ridiculous.”

Clay jogged down to the trash room and disappeared behind the door for a second. George stood by the wall shaking his head.

“See, was that so hard?” Clay said, emerging again.

“You’re ridiculous,” George said louder.

“I’m your hero? Is that what I heard you say?” Clay teased.

“Oh my god,” George laughed.

“Thank you, did you say?” Clay said, walking backwards towards his own room. “Oh, you’re welcome!”

George shouted down the hallway, “I’m gonna go crawl in my boxes, now, goodbye!”

Laughing, Clay turned the key in his lock.

His roommate, Darryl, was sitting in bed on his laptop. He had headphones on, but promptly pulled them off to smile at Clay. “Hey, what’s up?” he said cheerfully.

Clay smiled back. “Tired as balls.”

“Oh, my goodness, I know. Me too.”

Suddenly, Clay’s phone started ringing. He took a glance and sighed dramatically.

“What?” Darryl asked. “What is it?”

“It’s my mom,” Clay huffed. Darryl pursed his lips and looked away. “Jesus --” Clay raised the phone to his ear. “Hi, mom.” There was vague babbling on the other end. “Okay.” More babbling. “Yeah, I get it, it’s a long drive.” She babbled on. “Okay, yeah. Mmhm. Goodnight. Yeah, I love you, too, mom.” He hung up.

Clay swiveled his head back to Darryl. “She didn’t want to fall asleep without saying goodnight,” he said, exasperated.

“Aww, that’s actually really sweet,” Darryl replied.

“No!” Clay cried. “It’s annoying! It’s freaking helicopter mom!”

“Alright,” Darryl replied, drawing out the word. Clay flopped on his bed (with a bit of difficulty, since it was raised higher than the previous beds in his life) and squeezed his eyes shut.

--

Despite everything, as Clay was laying in bed that night, recalling the events of the day, he smiled softly to himself. Maybe this wouldn’t be so bad after all.

## Chapter End Notes

this is kinda cringe for me to write but i don't care because it's the first time i've been motivated to write for like four months and i need something to do during quarantine anyway so i'm just gonna ride this wave

# It Only Takes a Taste (when it's something special)

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

The coffee in the dining hall tasted like shit, Clay thought to himself, dragging a hand through his hair. It was 8am and they didn't need to be at the welcome meeting until 9:30, but Darryl had pulled open the blinds and insisted that they get an early start. The roommate in question was dual-wielding a fork and his phone, shoveling eggs into his face as he tapped away on some app.

It had been weird waking up in a room with some guy he'd only met that day. And it sounds even weirder when he thinks about it like that. But Darryl seemed like a nice enough guy, so far.

"I can't believe we have classes tomorrow already," Darryl said, putting his phone down for a second.

"I know," Clay responded, the effort to make small talk straining on his tired brain. "Like, give us a minute to unpack, geez."

"Exactly! USF gave us a whole week before the first day of classes," Darryl mentioned casually.

"Wait, USF?" Clay asked.

Darryl brought another forkful of breakfast to his mouth. "Yeah, what about it?"

"You went to University of South Florida?" Clay asked again.

"Oh!" Darryl finally realized. "Yeah, just for a year though. Didn't I mention I was a transfer student?"

Clay shook his head. "Nope."

Darryl laughed. "Well, I am!"

"That's kinda crazy though, I'm actually from Florida," Clay said.

"No way! Me too!"

It was Clay's turn to laugh. "Why'd you transfer here, though?"

Darryl shrugged. "I changed my major to Video Game Design halfway through and decided this school would be better for that."

Clay nodded. "Makes sense."

"I hope you don't mind that I'm a sophomore," Darryl said, scratching his head. "I can't believe I forgot to mention it."

"Don't worry about it," Clay said. "It'll be nice living with someone who kinda knows what they're doing."

Darryl laughed a bit too loud at that, and slapped a hand down on the table. "Yeah, kinda."

The welcome ceremony went on for far too long. What was it with universities and old white men talking at their students for hours? After that, they were dragged to some weird introductory activity that gave off suspiciously cult-ish vibes. Roommates and friends were torn apart and Clay was left in a sea of people, meant to find and shake hands with someone born in the same month as you. Clay found himself subconsciously scanning the crowd, though he wasn't sure exactly who he was looking for.

Once that ordeal was over with, Darryl dragged him back to the dining hall for more grub, then across campus to an auditorium for more "helpful information" from staff. At each stop, Darryl was more than eager to listen and take it all in. Clay just let it wash over his head, picking at his cuticles or counting the number of shits he gave about any of this. Zero; easy.

It was approaching evening when Darryl spotted the club fair on the campus green. "Oh, Clay! Let's go check that out! I wanna join a bunch of cool clubs." And at that moment, Clay knew that he couldn't take one more exaggerated smile or clipboard shoved at his chest.

"Actually, I think I'm gonna head back to the room," Clay said. "Don't let me hold you back though."

"Oh my goodness, I'm so sorry! It can get pretty overwhelming, definitely go take a rest if you need to." He playfully shooed Clay back in the direction of the dorm. "Don't worry about me, I can handle this rodeo on my own. You're sure you wanna miss this, though?"

Clay chuckled and shook his head. "I don't think I'd be interested in any of that."

"Well, you'd be surprised. But suit yourself!" Darryl started towards the fair.

"Thanks!" Clay called back, walking the opposite direction.

Though Darryl was a really nice guy, he was a bit much at times, and Clay took a deep breath once he was alone. All this mushy-gushy kumbaya crap that the school kept pushing on them was pretty suffocating, too. All Clay wanted was to get his degree and get out as quick as possible so he could start his real life. He didn't peak in highschool and he certainly wasn't gonna peak in college, either, like all the vapid Cali-boys signing up for football tryouts. This was just a necessary step; one of many. Though if he was being honest, he wasn't quite sure what his next step would be.

Clay was pulled out of his thoughts when he caught sight of a familiar figure approaching the dorm from an opposing pathway. In the same moment Clay looked over the figure turned their head and caught his eye. A brief flicker of surprise, then recognition. The boy from the other night, George. The boy gave a small smile, and Clay wasn't sure if he should wave or call out to him, so he just smiled back.

Clay reached the building first, swiping his card and holding the door open for George. He smiled and gestured with his arm in mock chivalry. "After you, good sir."

George scoffed and rolled his eyes. "Thanks," he said, in that uniquely British way.

"What brings you 'round these parts?" Clay joked, following into the hallway.

George laughed tersely, shaking his head, but said in the same joking manner, "I live here."

"No way! Me, too!" Clay shot back, kind of stupidly, but George laughed. "You ditchin' the rest of the festivities, too?"

"Guess so," George shrugged. "Too many people."

"I get that." Clay glanced at the time on his phone and felt a low grumble in his stomach. "Hey, did you grab dinner yet?"

George scrunched his eyebrows. "Uh, no."

"Well, were you planning on anything?"

"Not really, why?"

"I heard the Student Union has a Wendy's," Clay said pointedly.

George seemed to ponder this for a bit, holding back a smile. "Yes, now that you mention it, I remember hearing that as well."

Clay scratched his chin and smirked. He paused to think. "Alright, well see you later!" He suddenly turned on his heels and walked away from George.

The other boy stood for a moment with his eyebrows furrowed. "Wait, what?" he said, baffled. Clay made an ungodly wheezing sound, and George wondered if he was choking or coughing before he spun back around and burst into laughter.

"Come on!" he squeezed out between wheezes.

"What the hell was that?" George asked, smiling widely as he followed through the side exit.

This only elicited another wheeze, and Clay shook his head.

"You're ridiculous," George said.

--

The Wendy's was pretty empty; Clay supposed they'd beaten the dinnertime rush. While it would be nice to sit and eat for a bit after running all over campus all day, Clay wasn't sure how awkward a sit-down meal would be with someone he just met. So he walked over to the kiosk and clicked take-out. George took the one to the right of him.

"Wow," George said, swiping through the menu. "Futuristic."

Clay laughed. "Yeah, who talks to fast food employees anymore. Gross."

"Do we press 'meal plan' or 'cougar cash'?" George asked. "What is cougar cash?"

"I have no idea. I just pressed the first one cause it wasn't stupid."

They both finished their orders with little incident and shuffled over to the pick-up counter, only mildly confused by the whole process. Clay raised an eyebrow when he saw a tray come out with a sandwich, fries, a drink, and a frosty. George caught the look.

"What? Don't fat-shame me," he said. Clay just laughed and took his own sandwich. "I can't even hold all of this!"

Clay laughed harder. "Then why'd you get it?"

George gave a frustrated laugh. "I don't know! There were just so many options! I got -- overwhelmed."



“Oh my -- here, give me that, I’ll hold it for you,” Clay said, reaching for the fries.

“You better not eat any.”

“I’d never.”

## Chapter End Notes

what do you mean i'm "writing a college au because i'm sad my own college was cancelled because of covid and i'm living vicariously through my characters and inserting details about my own freshman year"? that's preposterous,,,

# **You are Caffeine (and i'm staying up all night)**

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Clay glanced at his schedule another time. He was fine. His first class of the day started at 8am. He had 20 more minutes. Darryl was taking more advanced classes, which apparently start later, so Clay was on his own this morning. And he'll be fine. How hard could it be to find a classroom?

15 more minutes, he noted to himself as he left the dining hall. From what he could tell, his class was in West Hall. That couldn't be more than a 3 minute walk, he estimated. Which gives plenty of time to go pick up that Starbucks he ordered from the Student Union. That would shorten his trip to class even more. Everything is going smoothly. There is no need to worry.

When Clay arrived at the Starbucks at 7:48 and his drink was not ready, he started to worry. He checked his phone again. 7:49. 11 minutes. That was plenty of time. Still, he tapped his foot, waiting for his name to be called. 7:51. 7:53. "Clay!" Finally. He grabbed the drink and started out the exit. 7 minutes. Everything is fine.

He checked the map on his phone again. Maybe the campus was bigger than he thought. At 7:56 he started to pick his pace up to a jog. When he considered if he should be embarrassed or not, he realized that there were very few people outside, which only made him even more worried, and he ran faster.

He finally reached the building at 7:58. Two minutes to get to his classroom. That's doable. Clay opened the door to see a four-story staircase spiraling up to the top. Heart pounding, he checked his schedule again. Room 401. That means...

With determination derived from the desire to not make a complete and utter fool of himself on the first day, Clay bounded up the stairs, two steps at a time. He opened the door at the top of the final flight with about thirty seconds to find the classroom. The diagram on the wall made little sense to his adrenaline-filled mind, so Clay started down the first hallway. 460, 458, wrong hallway. He twisted and turned through the labyrinth of doors, sipping his coffee, reading the numbers, hating himself.

8:00. He's out of time. The final stragglers in the hallway made their way into their classrooms and Clay still couldn't find his. 8:01. Since when did time pass so quickly? The minute hand shifted to 8:02 and Clay finally rounded the corner and saw room 411 on his right. Thank god. He made his way down the hallway. Two or three minutes can't be that big of a deal, right? Room 401 was closed and Clay briefly thought about just turning around and going back to bed, but he swung open the door and all eyes flicked to him.

The professor turned from the chalkboard and gave Clay a once over, lifting his brow at the Starbucks in his hand, and looking at his watch. "Thanks for coming," the professor said in a way that made Clay think he wasn't very thankful at all. "There are some seats at the back, if you'd be so kind." Clay nodded hastily and walked down the aisle of snickering students.

Near the back of the classroom, he caught the eye of one particular smirking student, who he recognized as George. Clay took a sip of his coffee in response and sat in a seat a couple rows in front of him.

"As I was saying," the professor continued from the front of the classroom, "the tools you learn in this class will not only help you to better understand history, but to better understand the future."

Clay discreetly turned his head to roll his eyes at George. The other boy grinned but nodded with his head towards the professor.

"... Analyzing primary source documents in five to six page papers throughout the semester," the professor rattled on. Though his heart-rate had calmed down since his run, Clay felt his head start to pound from boredom. "...And regular discussion questions prepared before class each day..."

Clay glanced over his shoulder and the small movement caused George to flick his eyes over. He suppressed a smile and shook his head. Clay smiled back, feeling a strange warmth in his chest, and immediate regret. Next time he'd get to class early so he could get a better seat.

The class continued in much the same way. The professor never shut up and Clay and George kept exchanging smiles and glances from across the classroom. When class was finally over, Clay made his way over to George's desk where he was packing up. "Didn't know you'd be in this class," he said, casually.

"Yes, strange how we keep bumping into each other," George responded.

"I don't mind, though," Clay said with a smile, more smoothly than he had intended.

George paused and scoffed, slinging his backpack over his shoulder and making his way towards the door as Clay followed.

"Hard time finding the classroom?" George teased.

"Actually, yeah."

George laughed. "Seems you found Starbucks alright, though."

"Okay, shut up!" Clay said, though his tone was not angry in the slightest. "I'm not just gonna sit here and take this abuse from you."

They both chuckled as they started down the stairs. "Oh, really? What are you gonna do, then?"

"I'm gonna -- I'm gonna push your British butt down the stairs."

"Excuse me," George scoffed.

Clay doubled down. "You heard me."

"That's --" George sputtered, "that's xenophobic!"

Clay wheezed so hard he had to grab the railing. George looked around to see who was paying attention to the maniac he was associated with, and laughed a little bit when Clay came up for air.

"Are you done?" George asked.

"You're an idiot," Clay said once he had caught his breath. They shared a short companionable silence for a moment before Clay said, "So, what's your major, anyways?"

"Uh, computer science," George said.

"Oh, cool. Me, too."

"Really?" George said. "Are you in any programming classes this semester?"

"Nah, just general requirements," Clay said. "Hence, history."

“Right, me too.”

“Speaking of history, that class is gonna be a shit-show.”

George chuckled. “Why do you say that?”

“The professor is clearly a nut job,” Clay joked. “And we already have so much work to do!”

“I don’t think he’s that bad,” George said. “You just don’t like him because he told you off for being late.”

“It’s not my fault Starbucks apparently has slow morning service.” George didn’t say anything, just looked at Clay. “Okay, point taken.”

They rounded down the last flight of stairs, and Clay whipped out his phone. “Put your number in there,” he said, shoving it at George. “Since we’re gonna be bumping into each other a lot more, now.”

George smiled and punched it in. “There.”

“Okay, perfect.” Clay glanced at the time. “I’ll text you later so you have my number, too. Do you have another class?”

“Uh, yeah,” George answered as they walked back outside. “So I should probably --”

“Yeah, me too,” Clay said, walking in the opposite direction. “I’ll see you.”

“Later!”

As the smaller boy walked away, Clay felt a smile on his face and a warmth in his chest. But he couldn’t linger on it too long or else he’d be late, again.

## Chapter End Notes

sorry this update took forever, I was busy procrastinating an essay was literally not that hard to write but now that the semester is officially done hopefully it'll be regular updates from now on!!

chapter from the same song as the work title is from -- Then OK (its a good song, okay?)

# Tell the Boys Where to Find My Body

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

The rest of his classes went unbearably slow without someone to tease, but Clay was finally done for the day. Except, not really, because for some reason, he already had mountains of homework. Pushing all of the information about syllabi and curriculum and office hours to the back of his mind, Clay walked back to his dorm.

He was considering how he would spend the rest of his evening when he heard his name being called from the lounge. The front of his dorm building opened up to a lobby with doors on either side leading to the residential hallways, but straight ahead was a shared lounge area populated with couches and vending machines. Darryl and a host of other people were sitting in a cluster of sofas, waving to Clay standing in the lobby.

“Hey, roomie!” Darryl called, beckoning Clay over. Clay begrudgingly approached.

“Hey, Darryl,” Clay said, standing awkwardly above Darryl’s seat. The crowd smiled at Clay politely, then devolved back into discussion. Darryl patted the seat to his left, and Clay sat on the armrest.

“These cool cats are my new friends from the Gamer’s Club!” Darryl said enthusiastically. “I met them at the club fair, and we totally hit it off,” he said with a sideways glance. “See, that’s what happens when you socialize, Clay. You make friends.”

“Yeah, I get it,” Clay chuckled.

A poofy haired guy in a bright blue hoodie leaned over. “So you’re the guy Darryl told us about, then?” Darryl smacked him on the arm.

“This is Zak,” Darryl told Clay.

“I’m Vincent,” the boy sitting next to Zak said, in a French accent. Clay waved to both of them.

“Those two are Callahan and Alyssa,” Darryl said, gesturing to a couple cuddling on the adjacent couch. “And we call that guy Ponk. I don’t know why.”

“Cos I do this,” Ponk said, and banged his head against the table in front of him. There was a dull ponk sound, as if something hollow hit something wooden. Clay nodded appreciatively.

“Anyway, that’s everyone,” Darryl said. “Well, there’s plenty more people in the club. These are just the cool ones.” The group burst into laughter at that, and Clay couldn’t help but smile along. “Everyone, this is Clay!” Everyone waved and gave scattered ‘hellos’.

“We have meetings every Friday,” Zak said. “You should join us for our first official meeting this week.”

Darryl piped up, “Yeah! We’re gonna play all sorts of games; PC games, console games, MMORPGs, retro games, they even said board games sometimes!” Clay was nodding his head. “Sorry this sounds like a business pitch, but games are more fun with more people! Whaddya think?”

“I mean, yeah,” Clay said, feeling more than one set of eyes on him. “I used to play a lot when I was younger, but, I don’t know.”

“Great!” Darryl said. “I’ll text you the info. You can tag along if you want, but it’s no pressure!”

Clay shuffled his feet for a second, then said, “Yeah, thanks, I’ll think about it,” and waved goodbye.

As he turned out of the lounge, someone shouted out, “Goodbye, Clay!” which erupted into a cacophony of farewells from the whole group. Clay rolled his eyes and blushed, swiping his ID quickly and dodging behind the door. He laughed to himself as he walked to his room, feeling a warmth in his chest he was unaccustomed to. Maybe he would swing by on Friday.

As soon as he threw his backpack on the ground and jumped onto his bed, he felt his phone start ringing. He pushed back the immediate annoyance and checked his phone. Upon seeing the caller ID, his chest swelled again. Abby, with a little pink heart. He quickly answered the call.

“Hey, babe,” he said sweetly.

The feminine voice on the other side responded, “Hey,” drawing out the word. “I’ve missed your voice.”

“I’ve missed yours, too.”

Abby giggled. “How was the move?”

“Long,” Clay admitted. “Painful. But successful, eventually. I’m all settled here.”

“Oh! You had your first day of classes today, right? How were those?”

Clay chuckled. “About the same. I can’t believe you’re already a week into classes.”

“Like five days,” Abby corrected, “but yeah. I guess they just do things different on the West Coast.”

Clay rolled his eyes, even though he knew Abby couldn’t hear it. “Yeah, yeah. Rub it in, Miss Scholarship,” he teased.

“Clay, you got into a good university, too!” she insisted.

“Little Miss Artist, gonna be famous,” Clay persisted.

“Clay!” Abby said, laughter and embarrassment in her voice.

“Alright, alright,” he finally surrendered. “I’m proud of you, ya know.”

“I know. And I’m proud of you, too.”

“Yeah.”

“I’m serious!” Abby pressed. “You’ll find your way, Clay.”

Clay laid back on his bed and closed his eyes. “If you say so.”

“I love you,” she said.

“I love you, too,” Clay responded without hesitation.

A faint noise sounded over the phone. “I gotta go, though, babe. I think my friend is knocking on my door.” Clay hummed in affirmation. “But I’ll talk to you later, okay?”

“Of course, Abby.”

“All right, bye.”

“Bye.” And she hung up the phone.

Clay tossed his phone down to the foot of his bed and pulled a pillow over his face. A flurry of emotions swirled around in his chest. Sadness, contentment, confusion, regret, love, fear. Was his “fresh start” far from home really worth it when his girlfriend was across the country? He’d gotten out of Florida, but for what? A degree that he doesn’t know what to do with? A couple of casual friends who would fade just like they all do? Clay sure hoped he’d find his way, or else he’d have to dig his way out from the piles and piles of debt that would inevitably drop.

He stayed in the storm a while longer, letting each passing thought grip his heart for a moment and then fall away one by one until they were all gone. In the calm, he sat up, mind empty of all but one idea. He grabbed his phone. In a couple of taps, he opened an empty conversation and typed out a message to George.

“hey nerd. bet you can’t guess who this is.”

He pressed send without thinking twice. It was only when he read it over for the first time that he realized how stupid it was.

## Chapter End Notes

title is from a fall out boy song with an outrageously long title (i’ve got all this ringing in my ears and none in my fingers)

# What's Hard is Simple, What's Natural Comes Hard

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

George set five alarms for the first morning of classes. 6:45, 6:50, 6:55, 7:00, and 7:05 labelled “YOU’D BETTER BE OUT OF BED, IDIOT.” He was up by the second alarm.

Everything was carefully planned and plotted and stuffed with extra time just in case. If he wanted to get to class ten minutes early (which he’d considered over and over -- it was early enough to show enthusiasm but late enough that he wouldn’t be alone with the professor) he had to leave for the dining hall no later than 7:15. He would give himself plenty of time to eat breakfast (the most important meal of the day) and leave for class at 7:35.

The walk turned out shorter than he’d expected and he found his classroom easily (as he had found each of his classes in advance, the day before.) In fact, everything went so well that George arrived at 7:47 but decided to loiter in the hallway until more students showed up.

Once the classroom was sufficiently filled, the next decision was where to sit. The back says “I’m gonna be watching videos on my laptop the whole class” and the front says “I’m gonna raise my hand for every question until the professor gets annoyed with me.” Too close to the door means “I can’t wait to get out of here” but too close to the windows mean “I’m more interested in watching the clouds than listening to the lecture.” Just to be safe, George chose a spot somewhere in the middle.

He pulled out his notebooks and lined his pencils up on his desk, nudging them into position. George couldn’t believe it. He didn’t care that it was bloody history, he was so excited. His first class of Uni. Or, since it’s in America, college. George chuckled lightly. America! New York, nonetheless. The opportunities laid in front of him were innumerable, much more than he’d ever have in his small English town back home. George felt something stirring in his stomach, and it wasn’t his breakfast; it was hope. More hope than he’d felt in a long time.

The professor looked at his watch and clapped his hands, startling George from his thoughts. “All right, that’s 8:00, folks,” he said. “Congratulations to all of you who made it here on time. Your first class of the semester. As you’ll come to know, punctuality is very important to me. I often find that a punctual student is also a successful student.”

George nodded in his seat, jotting down “punctuality” on his paper. The professor rambled on a while longer, touching on his other values -- honesty, diligence, and respect -- and eventually transitioning into topics relevant to history.

“History is not merely a study of the past. It is a study of the present, and of the future --”

The professor was interrupted by the door opening. George immediately recognized the sheepish boy walking in with a cup of coffee. George rolled his eyes as he made his way into the classroom, catching his gaze as he took a seat in front of him.

Any attempts to pay attention in that class were severely thwarted by the latecomer. Clay had taken it upon himself to look over his shoulder and roll his eyes at the professor’s dry lecturing every five minutes.

When the full 90 minutes of class had passed, George left the classroom, tailed by Clay and roped



into conversation. George checked his watch as they laughed down the stairs, trying to stay on schedule and not get distracted any further. Despite this, George had started feeling at ease in the other boy's company. That is, until he pushed his phone into George's chest. Hastily punching his number in and handing it back, George started to fidget with his backpack straps.

"Perfect," Clay said. "I'll text you later." This struck both relief and anxiety in George. Relief that the pressure to text first was taken off of his shoulders, and the anxiety of anticipating social interaction. George's flight response was immediately activated.

"Do you have another class?" Clay asked, much to George's relief.

"Uh, yeah," he said, gesturing awkwardly over his shoulder. "So I should probably --"

Clay murmured something in agreement but it didn't register for George, who was already backing away.

"I'll see you," Clay called, and George tossed back a terse "later" in response.

Once George was seated in his next class, five minutes early, he started to calm down. Ridiculous, he thought to himself. You're supposed to be making friends, not running away from them. George shook his head, berating himself silently all class. George put all his effort into focusing for the rest of his day, pushing any and all anxieties out of his mind. By the time his last class ended, the immense effort of the task had left him exhausted, but nonetheless with a heavy load of homework to be done.

Opening his door, George was relieved to notice his roommate wasn't there. Though they hadn't talked much, George didn't have a good feeling about him. He gave off stoner vibes. The less they interacted, George thought, the better.

Though the magnetic pull of the bed was difficult to resist, George sat himself at his desk and started on his work for the day. This is what you're here for, he reminded himself. He was halfway through his history homework when his phone buzzed on the desk beside him. He casually flipped it over.

*Unknown number*

**hey nerd. bet you can't guess who this is.**

George knew exactly who it was and changed the contact information accordingly. He didn't feel the anxiousness he had earlier and the words fell smoothly out, like conversation with Clay always seemed to.

"Oh boy I gave my number to so many people today, I wonder which one it is?"

*Clay*

**i'm actually offended by that  
here's a hint**

He sent an image. George clicked it to reveal a picture of a Starbucks drink. George chuckled in recognition.

"Oh! You're the kid that keeps following me around!"

**wow ok. i'm one more word away from blocking you**

Even over text George could read his sarcasm.

“No! I’m just joking lol”

“I know it’s you CLAY”

**thank you**

**GEORGE**

“No PROBLEM”

George smiled at the chat, marveling at how easy the conversation was.

**did you start the homework for professor d-bag yet?**

“Almost done, haha”

**you’re kidding me**

“Nope.”

**i hate you**

“It’s not that hard, really”

**i looked at it once and wanted to vomit**

**we need to make like a study group or something**

George pondered the idea.

“You just want to cheat off of me.”

**maybe**

**but isn’t that what friendship is all about**

“I’ll consider it.”

Clay sent a ridiculous gif of a dancing dog.

**anyway, are you into video games?**

“Uh, kinda, I guess. Why?”

**well i heard about this club and i didn’t want to go alone**

**it meets this friday**

“A club for video games? Sounds kinda lame”

**shut up it’ll be fun**

**just think about it, okay?**

“Okay.”

**okay**

“Well, I should get back to my homework.”

**gross**

“Say that to my GPA next semester.”

**whatever, nerd. see ya later**

“See ya.”

George looked back through the conversation, allowing himself a moment to just smile. Then he tossed it onto his bed and focused his attention back on his work.

The rest of the week passed in a similar fashion. Ducking in and out of classes. Homework received and homework completed. Lunches ordered and lunches eaten. The only thing that changed was Clay thankfully learned how to arrive to class on time. Some days George grabbed dinner by himself, but some days he ate with Clay and his roommate. Those days were the most fun, George thought. It was only the first week, but he had already made some lasting memories.

By the time Friday rolled around, George had nearly forgotten about the gaming club invite. But not completely. As he finished his last assignment, his phone buzzed with a new text.

*Clay*

**hey the meeting's in half an hour if you wanna come**

George didn't open it. He just looked at the notification. All of the anxiety that had been floating around him all week suddenly rushed back. On one hand, it would be fun to do something he enjoys with people he enjoys being around. But on the other... how many people? How many people that he didn't know, who knew each other? How many people that Clay knew, people that Clay liked more than George? How many people that would see him as an outsider, a nobody?

George's heart started beating faster than it ought to. He bit his thumb and typed out a message.

“Sorry I completely forgot. I have a ton of homework to do tonight, not sure if I'll be able to make it.”

He looked at the pile of finished homework on his desk.

**aw man screw the homework this is gonna be way more fun!**

“I wish I could but I really don't want to fall behind”

**you sure?**

George wasn't sure, but the pounding in his chest decided for him.

“I'm sure.”

**suit yourself, then. i'll be lonely without you :(**  
**next time, then?**

“Next time”

“Next time,” George said aloud to himself, to calm his shaking fingers. This time he could be weak. Next time he would be brave.

title is from the song Anyone Can Whistle from the musical of the same name

also the texting was so hard to format in this chapter ,,, ao3 doesn't let you indent and that's how i had it in my google docs so just,, i hope it's not too confusing to read  
kasdjfkajsdjk

# Why Did It Have to Be You?

## Chapter Notes

sorry this took so long to update! Thank you to everyone who stuck with me~ I hope you enjoy :)

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Clay was disappointed that George couldn't go to the club, for sure. Over the past couple of days, Clay spent more of his free time hanging out with George than doing anything else. They grabbed most of their meals together, checked out some events together (academic bingo, residence hall kahoots) and Clay was feeling more and more comfortable around him. It would be easy to text Darryl and back out, but if Clay ever wanted to make his time here worth it, he had to take risks, even risks as small and insignificant as going to the Gaming Club alone.

Darryl called Clay about 15 minutes before the meeting to ask if he was still coming.

"Yeah," Clay said. "I asked George again but he's busy, so it'll just be me."

Darryl made a whining noise over the phone. "That sucks! I love that little muffinhead. You alright finding the place on your own?"

"Yeah, I think so."

"Cool! I'm already here so just text me if you're lost or anything."

Clay chuckled. "Alright, see ya."

"See you soon!" Darryl hung up.

Having spent a majority of his class time in the Science and Technology Building, Clay found the room with relative ease and braced himself before opening the door.

Clay was met with a respectable sized group of people -- impressive, really, for a gaming club -- one of which poked his head up and shouted, "Clay!" in delight. Darryl's exclamation caught the attention of several other familiar faces who turned and welcomed him with enthusiasm. Clay recognized them as the gang he met in the common area a couple days ago, and joined them with a smile. Immediately put at ease by this warm reception, Clay was able to easily settle into the mix.

Taking a moment to look around the classroom, Clay noticed rows of tables with fancy looking computers near the back. Up by the whiteboard stood three people chatting and connecting a console to the projector. "We're lucky the staff is letting us use the media room this year," an unfamiliar face in the group said. An upperclassman, Clay assumed.

"Yeah," another person piped up. "Remember that time it was booked and we had to go to Dave's dorm room?"

The upperclassmen laughed, reminiscing. "Damn, that was so long ago."

Darryl, wide-eyed, nudged Clay and addressed the rest of the newbies. "You guys! I'm so excited.

Aren't you guys excited?" Zak let out a whoop and the group cheered; excited. Ponk pumped his fist in the air and Callahan threw his arm around Alyssa, who was laughing meekly. Clay caught a glimpse of a smiling boy, sitting on top of a desk off to the side, leaning back casually. He wore a snapback and a healthy dose of scruff on his chin. The hoodie he wore was covered in what looked like little pandas.

Before Clay could decide to wander over and strike up a conversation, the people at the front of the classroom called everyone to attention.

"Welcome to our Gaming Club, everyone!" The tallest boy clapped his hands. "I'm impressed at the turnout! We're gonna have a great year. I'm your president, Dave. Let's see, I'm a senior Game Design major, and I've been running this club since I started here!"

The older members who already knew him cheered and clapped. A shorter boy stepped up and cleared his throat. "Hey, guys! I'm Jordan and I'm the vice president. I'm also a senior, and I major in Computer Science. Shameless plug, I'm also in the Acapella group "Clef Hangers" here on campus, so check that out if you're interested." Jordan stumbled through his last sentences while enduring several slaps on the arm from his fellow officers. Again, the regular members laughed, seemingly used to this.

The final officer stepped up to introduce herself. "Hello, everyone! My name is Jennifer but you can call me Jen. I'm a junior Business major and though I've been in Gaming Club since I was a freshman, this is my first year as your treasurer. So let's get the boring stuff out of the way first, there will be a small membership fee of ten dollars," the upperclassman lightheartedly boomed, "but that's only to fund the awesome stuff we get to do in this club! It lets us buy the newest and coolest games to play together, as well as some other opportunities that I'll let the other officers talk about more in depth later."

"Thanks, Jen," Dave said, and placed a clipboard on the first table. "First things first, if you all could pass around this clipboard and fill in your name, email, and grade. Now about those cool things this club has to offer. We've got a bunch of e-sports competitions throughout the year. Some are held on campus and some are held at other local schools. We'll let you know more about that as it gets closer. What else, what else?" Dave trailed off.

"There's the Code-Off in the spring," Jordan said. "That's one of my personal favorites. You compete in teams to work on coding projects, and if you win at the school level you'll compete against the county, then the state! That's pretty far off but just something to think about for any of my coders in the audience."

"And we'll also be holding fundraisers throughout the year," Jen added. "In the past we've set up games like Super Smash Bros in the quad and sold baked goods, but we're open to other ideas as well."

The clipboard made its way around Clay's table. Clay wrote down his own information and in an instant of genius and mischievousness, wrote down George's name and school email below his own. *Good luck ignoring all those emails*, Clay thought with a grin.

"Alright, enough talk," Dave said. "This is *Gaming Club* not *Debate Club*. We know what you people want. To start off the year we'll take turns playing Mario Kart. Nothing too competitive, just something to get us all warmed up to each other. In the coming weeks we'll do more stuff on the computers back there, online stuff and multiplayer PC stuff, but for right now we've got my Switch and this projector. Who's up first?"

The room erupted into chaos, laughter and wrestling for the controllers. Clay hung back and

watched the crowd with a smile on his face and a feeling of contentment. Once the first couple of players took their positions and the clamor settled down, Darryl sat next to Clay, beaming. "Aren't you glad you came?" he teased.

Clay couldn't find it in him to tease back. "Actually, I really am," he answered genuinely. "Thanks, man."

"What are roommates for?" Darryl responded cheekily.

Darryl's friends were gathered close to the projector, watching the race. Darryl turned back to join them and Clay followed, the environment causing excitement to bubble in his belly. Bananas dropped on the tracks, ink splattered across the screen, last place zooming into second, and the room cheered. Several rounds flew by, controllers rotating from player to player. Game after game saw the same champion undefeated, and he dared someone to dethrone him.

Darryl made a face after being blue-shelled out of victory, trudging to the back of the room. Clay stepped up. "Alright, I'll try," he said, taking a seat next to the victor. "To avenge Darryl." Clay's comment sparked a flurry of cheers from Darryl and his friends as Clay selected his character.

Another challenger emerged from the crowd. "Okay, gimme one of those," a boy drawled in a brash voice. Clay turned to see the boy in the panda hoodie taking another controller. "It's on."

"Anyone else?" the champion taunted, eyeing his competition. "No? That's alright, we'll go with just three then."

The boy in the hoodie selected Princess Peach and laughed heartily at the resulting jeers from the crowd.

"Okay," Clay teased.

"What?" the boy defended. "She's good luck." Clay waved it off as the countdown started at the starting line of Wild Woods.

And they were off. The champion -- racing with Wario -- pulled an early lead, zig-zagging through the course's obstacles, but the crowd was rooting for the underdogs. Princess Peach lagged behind with a false start and the boy protested with a shout. "Dude! I was holding the button!"

Clay made his way down a shortcut, grabbing three mushrooms and zooming into second place by the end of the first lap. Darryl and the others cheered for him. The champion remained calm but the boy in the hoodie noticed and was outraged. "Cheater!" he cried.

Clay scoffed. "It's called strategy," he joked. The banter distracted the boy and Peach was hit by a red shell, pushing him back into sixth.

"Oh my *god*!"

The onlookers encouraged him, still booing the champion. Holding tight to first place, however, he was unbothered, and drifted around corners with ease. Clay glanced over to his opponent's screen, formulating a plan in his mind. He had been saving a Super Star in his pocket for most of the race. He noticed that his opponent however, tended to use all of his power-ups as soon as he got them.

Nearing the end of the final lap, Clay was right on Wario's tail. As the pair of them jumped the lilies on the pond right before the finish line, they collected their last item boxes. Clay glanced over to the other screen as the power-up clicked into place. A coin. Perfect.

Clay knew this was his chance. As he rushed over the last dash pad, he used his Super Star. Since Wario didn't have any kind of speed boost, he wouldn't be able to use the jump ramp right before the finish line. But Clay could, and he was hoping that extra airtime would give him enough momentum to sweep in and steal first place.

The tension built as Clay swung left and jumped the ramp. Wario took the longer main path, just as Clay had expected. The combined advantages of the Star, the jump, and the element of surprise allowed Clay to land a *hair* in front of Wario, bumping him just barely out of the way, and crossed the finish line in first place. The crowd roared behind him, and the dethroned champion gave Clay a sportsmanlike nod, though his face was painted with disbelief and dissatisfaction. He put his controller on his seat and fell back into the crowd.

The boy with the hoodie burst into his own cheers as he crossed the finish line in third place. Clay hadn't been paying attention to him, but he found it surprising that he'd managed to make a comeback.

"Woah, really? I thought you were like, last place," Clay remarked.

The boy scoffed. "Are you kidding? No way. I mean, I was like tenth at one point, but, whatever."

"How?" Clay gawked.

"It's a little something I like to call Bullet Bill," he responded, a cheeky grin on his face.

Darryl rushed forward and clapped his hands on the back of Clay's shoulders. "That was amazing! I can't believe you knocked that guy down!" Clay chuckled at his roommate's enthusiasm. "And Princess Peach! You're not bad either. It's Nick, right?"

The boy in the hoodie nodded. "That's me."

"Wanna head to dinner with us?" Darryl asked. "Unless you've got other plans?"

"Heck yeah, man. I'd love to," Nick said. "Darryl, right? And what's the winner's name?" Clay told him. "Well, it's nice to meet some fellow nerds. Where are we eating?"

As the meeting concluded, the gang set out for the dining hall with a new friend. Nick settled easily into the mix, being just as loud or louder than even Darryl and Zak. Clay pulled out his phone while they were eating and texted George.

"you hungry? club's over and the gang's in the dining hall"

George texted back quickly. He must be done with his homework, Clay thought.

**Sorry, I got dinner a little while ago**  
**How was the meeting?**

"fun lol"

"i won Mario Kart"

"i'll talk to you when i get back"

**Sounds good :)**

Once everyone had finished eating, they cleaned up their plates and headed out. Darryl and the others had some shenanigans to attend to in Callahan's dorm, so Nick and Clay walked out together, making light conversation.



Neither of them had started on a different path or said goodbye, and they both realized it at the same time, when they arrived at the same dorm building. “Wait, you live here?” Nick asked, swiping his ID.

“*You* live here?” Clay echoed.

“Yeah. Weird that we’ve never met before.”

Clay shrugged and followed him inside. Then they turned the same corner down the same hallway. They laughed.

“Wait, what room are you in?” Clay asked. “This is crazy.”

“B1--” Nick was cut off by the sound of a door opening down the hall. His door in fact. Opened by none other than George, carrying a laundry bag. He spotted Clay and Nick and his eyes opened wide. “That’s the one,” Nick said matter-of-factly. “Hey, roomie.”

Clay’s eyes went wide. “*George* is your roommate?”

“You *know* George?” Nick retorted.

George brought a hand to his head. “Oh, hey, you two.”

*Great*, George thought.

## Chapter End Notes

chapter title is from "You" by dodie

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